

# **MADD and Traffic Safety: Grassroots Success**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the years since Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) began, dramatic improvement in highway safety in the United States (US) has resulted. In 1980, alcohol was involved in an estimated 28,000 traffic crash deaths as well as hundreds of thousands of injuries. That year Candy Lightner, the mother of one 13-year-old victim, began the group which would ultimately focus the attention of the nation on the problem of drunken driving. The group's mission was to fight drunken driving and to help victims of this terrible crime. 15 years later, attitudes and behavior have changed and MADD's work has been credited as an important factor in reducing alcohol-related traffic deaths to approximately 42 percent of such fatalities. Recent surveys recognized MADD as America's best-liked charity and the most widely recognized group fighting drunk driving.

MADD has used public education programs, victim assistance, and legislative activism, helped along by active cooperation of federal, state and local officials and law enforcement, to accomplish its goals. One of the newer programs, "Rating the States," has proven effective in prompting legislative action that had repeatedly been delayed.

MADD's formation and growth as a volunteer organization offers an example with potential for expansion to other countries. A look at its mission, training, programs and accomplishments could help those who are interested in applying citizen activism to other social problems.

### **INTRODUCTION, EARLY HISTORY AND SOCIAL/LEGAL CONTEXT**

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is a non-profit organization that began in 1980, after a 13-year-old girl was killed by a drunken driver who had several prior offenses. Although the organization appeared as a novelty and was expected to have no lasting impact, it developed into one of the most powerful forces in the USA in the prevention of alcohol-related motor vehicle trauma. JD McCarthy (1987), Patrick McCarthy (1990), Fell (1994) and others observed the changes in programmatic activity and alcohol-related crash statistics that transpired over the 1980s and credited the citizen activist movement as one of several important factors in those changes.

After Candy Lightner's daughter Cari was killed, she found that the legal system at that time provided a very unsatisfactory response to the tragedy she and other victims had suffered. She wanted to bring about change in this system so that there would be fewer innocent victims of drunken drivers, offenders would be dealt with more severely, and anyone who became a victim would be assured rights and adequate consideration under the law. She

formed MADD with the mission “to stop drunk driving and to support victims of this violent crime.”

In and prior to 1980, the predominant judicial response to drunken drivers in the USA involved diversion into education and treatment programs. This emphasis avoided or minimized the use of sanctions for the offense of drunken driving, which was seen not as a serious criminal problem but almost as a behavior to be expected from those with a drinking problem. It was believed that criminal sanctions would have little effect on these individuals. There was little acknowledgment of the trauma suffered by the victims of drunken driving crashes, who often felt re-victimized by the judicial proceedings in which they were accorded few rights and scant consideration. Further, social norms reflected a tolerance of drinking, and drunken behavior was a source of amusement rather than a matter of serious concern.

Federal response to drunken driving in the 1970s focused primarily on Alcohol Safety Action Programs, which involved enforcement, adjudication, rehabilitation and information/education programs. However, effectiveness was limited by a lack of citizen support and media coverage. Offender diversion into treatment/education programs indicated little effectiveness in reducing the problem. (Peck, Sadler and Perrine 1985) At the same time, it was estimated that as many as 5 to 10 percent of weekend nighttime drivers had a blood alcohol measurement of 0.10 or greater, the legal limit for most US states. (Wolfe 1974)

In this context, MADD took the view that driving under the influence (DUI) is a crime and should be treated as such, rather than merely as a benign symptom of a drinking problem. MADD focused immediately on the need for stricter laws to deal with drunken driving offenses. Early goals for the organization included mandatory jail for repeat offenders, a higher legal drinking age, limits on sales of cut-price drinks which encouraged excessive consumption, and specific criminal justice rights for DUI victims.

## **EARLY RESEARCH AND EXPECTATIONS**

The early 1980s saw rapid growth in MADD, and the rate of growth drew the attention of researchers interested in assessing MADD's impact and potential for producing change. Ritchey and Daniels (1983) reviewed MADD's activities, structure, goals and objectives, noting the correlation of early chapter locations with factors such as conservative political trends, religious factors and regionalism, and speculated on possible ramifications. They were uniformly pessimistic about the likelihood of success in reducing drunk driving and providing long-term benefit to victims, hypothesizing that MADD was likely to achieve symbolic but not actual victory.

Outcomes they considered unlikely included: a long-term reduction in alcohol-related crashes and fatalities; an impact on impaired driving and resulting fatalities by problem drinkers; a reduction of youthful involvement in drinking-driving and alcohol-related fatalities; and a sustained effect on public attitudes toward drinking and driving behavior.

Throughout the early 1980s, the number of MADD chapters mushroomed, with a comparable growth in the amount of media coverage of drunken driving issues, legislation and MADD activities. (McCarthy et al, 1989) Enforcement of drunken driving laws

increased, with a dramatic upturn in the number of DUI arrests annually compared to the late 1970s (FBI).

Despite increases in the number of miles driven annually, both the number and percentage of alcohol-related traffic deaths began to fall. (Perrine et al, 1989) Most significantly, however, the Fatal Accident Reporting Systems (FARS) of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that alcohol involvement in traffic fatalities had fallen from approximately 59 percent in 1980 to 42 percent in 1994, nearly a 37 percent reduction. At the same time, vehicle miles traveled, numbers of vehicles and licensed drivers and total traffic fatalities all increased. The average blood alcohol content (BAC) level of arrested offenders dropped from approximately 0.19 to 0.16. (Perrine, Peck and Fell, 1989) In addition, groups which demonstrated the first dramatic change were youthful drivers and high BAC drivers -- the very ones considered least likely to be affected by the awareness and enforcement efforts advocated by MADD.

Although other factors clearly played a role, much of the change was energized by the actions of these citizen-activist groups and the resulting publicity which they focused on the impaired driving issue. Fell (1994) listed the major factors involved in the decline of alcohol-related fatal crashes in the last ten years as: 1) increased public awareness of the problem; 2) tougher laws and better enforcement; 3) raising drinking age to 21 in all States; 4) prevention/ inter-vention/positive alternatives to drinking and driving; 5) decline in youthful driver population; and 6) decrease in per capita alcohol consumption.

By 1990 MADD had been credited with promoting the passage of more than 1,250 tougher DUI laws throughout the states, as well as a number of federal laws; some 1,000 laws affecting victim rights had also been enacted. Public opinion polls charted major changes in reported drinking-driving behavior (AIRAC, 1988), increasing acceptance of using a "designated driver" or other means of avoiding driving impaired (Apsler, 1989) and, despite fluctuations in national media attention, a sustained concern about the hazards of driving impaired by alcohol or other drugs (AIRAC, 1988).

Researchers Patrice Rogers and Steve Schoenig looked specifically at the impact of California's 1982 DUI legislative reforms (which enhanced DUI penalties, improved sentencing uniformity, and introduced illegal per se at 0.10) and the pre-legislative, anti-DUI public sentiment generated largely by MADD. Including the formation date of MADD as an intervention in their time series analysis showed that its pre-legislative effect was greater than that of the legislation. The results of their analysis suggest that most of the reduction following implementation of the legislation "was triggered by the publicity and social factors beginning prior to adoption of the 1982 legislation." (Rogers & Schoenig, 1994)

Williams (1992) attributed the decline in the percentage of fatally injured drivers with high BACs during the 1980s to three primary factors: 1) changing social norms regarding health-related behavior; 2) increased grass roots activism that provoked heightened public awareness and energized governmental and private sector action; and 3) proliferation of effective laws. Although other factors played a role, it is clear that much of the progress described above was energized by the actions of the citizen-activist groups and the resulting publicity which they focused on the impaired driving issue.

## **GOALS AND PROGRAMS**

In 1990 MADD adopted two packages of goals which spelled out its approach to achieving the mission. One was the “20 By 2000,” a set of legislative and program goals to fight drunken driving, framed in five different target areas: Youth, Enforcement, Sanctions, Program Self-Sufficiency, and Responsible Marketing and Alcohol Service. “20 By 2000” referred to the MADD goal of reducing the proportion of traffic fatalities involving alcohol from 50 percent in 1990 to 40 percent by the year 2000, a 20 percent relative reduction. (MADD, 1990) Victim issues were concentrated in five main goals, including Constitutional Amendments for Victim Rights; Victim Compensation; Dram Shop Liability; Amendments to Bankruptcy Codes, to prevent offenders from discharging their duty to their victims through declaring bankruptcy; and Sanctions for Child Endangerment.

In developing programs MADD’s priorities have been to help victims, to educate the public, and to press for stricter DUI laws. The resulting programs have utilized the victim experience to maximum effect, whether in testimony before state legislatures or the U.S. Congress, or on Victim Impact Panels speaking to groups of offenders. The faces of individual victims made the problem more tangible to the public, and MADD members took part in media events and public education campaigns to heighten awareness of impaired driving risks.

When victims approach MADD for help, a victim advocate can help the family prepare a victim impact statement, so the jury has a chance to hear how the victim’s life has been affected by the reckless act of the drunk driver. The advocate will go with the victim to court, invite the victim to a support group, and help them apply for state victim compensation funds.

Research points to benefits for the victim from involvement in programs like a Victim Impact Panel, where the victims or family members describe in detail to groups of DUI offenders how the crash has changed their lives. (Mercer, Lorden and Lord, 1994) The program may even lower recidivism rates for offenders participating in the program. (O’Laughlin, 1990)

## **PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ACTIVIST TRAINING**

Through programs like Project Red Ribbon, which features a red ribbon to be attached to a visible location on vehicles, MADD has reminded drivers not to drive after drinking and have drawn the attention of the public. An annual Post/Essay Contest invites the participation of thousands of school-age children across the country in addressing the problem of youthful consumption and drinking and driving through their writing and artistic talents.

Active cooperation of federal, state and local officials and law enforcement has helped to further many programs. Federal support has been provided for MADD training programs on impaired driving issues. Highway safety professionals and agency officials have played an active role in MADD training conferences for activists and have also advised and participated with MADD in constructing several programs, including National Sobriety Checkpoint Week and “Rating the States.” National Sobriety Checkpoint Week features a joint effort between MADD, law enforcement and corporate sponsors to draw attention to the high-risk travel period surrounding July 4, Independence Day.

Another program which has effectively combined activist approaches with highway safety expertise and corporate sponsorship is "Rating the States." (MADD, 1991, 1993) MADD brought together its public policy leaders with highway safety experts and federal and state agency officials to shape a survey designed to assess programs and progress against drunken driving. The program provoked action on legislative measures that had repeatedly been stymied and prompted several state governors to set up or re-vitalize their DUI Task Force to address the problem.

Whether through Victim Impact Panels or Rating the States, MADD and its programs offer an example with potential for expansion to other countries and to other issues. A look at its mission, training, programs and accomplishments could be instructive to those who are interested in applying citizen activism to impaired driving or other social problems.

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